LINEAGES
Korean Art at The Met
In celebrating the twenty-fifth anniversary of the Arts of Korea Gallery, this issue of the Bulletin invites us to reflect on the past while embracing the future. The accompanying exhibition marks an important milestone in The Metropolitan Museum of Art’s history—the establishment of the Arts of Korea Gallery in 1998. Designed by Korean-born architect Kyu Sung Woo and his firm based in Cambridge, Massachusetts, the gallery beautifully realizes The Met’s commitment to the display and study of Korean art and culture—recognizing their importance within the multiplicity of cultures represented here. Since its opening, the gallery has served as a platform for The Met’s nearly seven hundred Korean objects that date from the Bronze Age to the present with particular strengths in lacquer, Buddhist paintings, and ceramics. It has inspired pioneering exhibitions, introducing topics such as munbangdo (scholar accoutrement paintings) and buncheong ceramic ware to a global audience. It has been a space of active reflection, with talks, class visits, and videos about art making, ritual practices, and traditional music all helping to share the richness of Korean culture in ways that were impossible before its inception.

The Met was one of the first museums in the United States to open a gallery dedicated to Korean art. This was made possible by the vision of former and present Met colleagues and Korean advisors, who collectively laid the foundation for ongoing initiatives and collaborations to showcase Korean art at The Met. The Korea Foundation was instrumental in the establishment of the Arts of Korea Gallery, and the Kun-Hee Lee Fund for Korean Art, created by the Samsung Foundation of Culture, has supported the gallery’s dynamic programming. The Republic of Korea’s national museums and private institutions have shared their collections as short- and long-term loans, greatly enriching The Met’s exhibits. The Ministry of Culture, Sports and Tourism, The Republic of Korea (MSCT), has sponsored a gallery refurbishment, programming, and special exhibitions. We are grateful for its support of the exhibition Lineages: Korean Art at The Met and this Bulletin, and deeply appreciate the generosity of all the lenders, in particular the Leeum Museum of Art, Seoul, and the National Museum of Modern and Contemporary Art, Korea. The Lila Acheson Wallace Fund for The Metropolitan Museum of Art, established by the cofounder of Reader’s Digest, makes possible, in part, The Met’s quarterly Bulletin program.

Lineages: Korean Art at The Met reminds us of the crucial role art plays in enabling individuals and societies to narrate the past and imagine the future. Pairing The Met’s historical collection with important international loans of Korean modern and contemporary art, this Bulletin and exhibition illustrate both the continuities and ruptures of style, form, and medium that have defined the dynamic terrain of Korean art. The works tell multiple stories about tradition, history, and socio-cultural change and evolution. By embracing the duality of looking backward and looking forward, the artists featured here honor their past, acknowledge their present, consider their future, and, in turn, inspire us to do the same.

Max Hollein
Marina Kellen French Director and CEO
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Fig. 1. Suh Se Ok (徐世鈺, 1929–2020). People (사람들), 1988. Ink on danji (mulberry paper), 73⅞ × 73⅞ in. (187 × 187 cm). National Museum of Modern and Contemporary Art, Korea
left, right, left, right—it is easy to imagine Suh Se Ok moving his brush across the paper to create the diagonal marks in his 1988 painting People (fig. 1).\(^1\) Suh builds a complex image by way of a seemingly straightforward repetitive pattern. Yet the title forces us to look more closely at the pointed units and to notice that the individual strokes form the character for “human” (人, in). In the center, the ordered rows dissolve into intersecting lines—a landscape of many people in which it is progressively more difficult to identify discrete elements. In calling the work “people” and not person or man, Suh compels us to consider both the part and the whole, the individual and the collective.

People is the opening image of Lineages: Korean Art at The Met, an exhibition that celebrates the twenty-fifth year of the Arts of Korea Gallery at The Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York. Through some thirty paintings and ceramics dating from the twelfth century to the present day, it offers an exploration of the history of Korean art in four intertwined themes—things, places, people, and lines.\(^2\) These themes place objects drawn from The Met collection in active dialogue with loans by twentieth-century Korean artists, many of whom are only now gaining attention in the broader global context of modernism.\(^3\) Suh’s mesmerizing image encapsulates all four of our themes; indeed, many other works could be sorted into more than one category, a fact we knowingly embrace. By emphasizing each object and its formal and material characteristics, Lineages introduces uncharted narratives in order to shift the story of Korean art beyond the simple terms of “traditional” and “modern,” inviting us to consider the manner in which stylistic lineages are continued, challenged, or reshaped. Seeing these pieces alongside one another rather than in a strict chronological framework allows us to appreciate ideas that have resonated across time and bound artists together.

The first works of Korean art to enter The Met collection were eight musical instruments that arrived as part of the monumental gift of the Crosby Brown Collection, in 1889.\(^4\) Four years later, in 1893, a mid-fifteenth-century inscribed buncheong dish decorated with stamp-impressed chrysanthemums and dots in white slip was acquired by the Museum through a gift of 245 Asian ceramics from the Hudson River School painter Samuel Colman and his wife, Ann Lawrence Colman (née
Fig. 3. Trefoil-shaped covered box with chrysanthemums, Goryeo dynasty (918–1392), ca. 12th century. Lacquer inlaid with mother-of-pearl and tortoiseshell over pigment and brass wire, L. 4 in. (10.2 cm). The Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York, Fletcher Fund, 1925 (25.215.41a, b)

Fig. 4. Unidentified artist. *Amitabha and Kshitigarba*, Goryeo dynasty (918–1392), first half of the 14th century. Hanging scroll; ink and color on silk, 72 ⅜ × 31 ⅛ in. (183.8 × 80.6 cm). The Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York, Rogers Fund, 1913 (13.5)

Fig. 5. Unidentified artist. *Water-moon Avalokiteshvara*, Goryeo dynasty (918–1392), first half of the 14th century. Hanging scroll; ink and color on silk, 79 ⅛ × 30 ⅜ in. (201.6 × 76.5 cm). The Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York, Charles Stewart Smith Collection, Gift of Mrs. Charles Stewart Smith, Charles Stewart Smith Jr., and Howard Caswell Smith, in memory of Charles Stewart Smith, 1914 (14.76.6)
Dunham) (fig. 2). In the subsequent decades, the Korean collection grew steadily with additions of rare objects from the Goryeo dynasty (918–1392), such as a twelfth-century inlaid lacquer box (fig. 3) and five prized Buddhist paintings (figs. 4–8). Acquired between 1913 and 1930, these paintings were misattributed as either Japanese or Chinese until the 1970s.\(^5\)

It was not until 1998 that The Met signaled its commitment to the serious study of Korean art with the establishment of its first permanent gallery dedicated to the subject (fig. 9).\(^6\) Since then, diverse art forms and topics, such as buncheong, the Diamond Mountains, Joseon still life painting, and the Silla dynasty (57 BCE–935 CE), have been examined through pioneering special exhibitions and publications.\(^7\) Additionally, The Met has adopted a more strategic acquisition plan, filling in gaps and expanding the types and styles of objects that are collected. With Lineages, the aim is to consider The Met’s place in shaping the perception of historical Korean art for an international audience and to ask how new lineages have been shaped by Korean artists not only responding to the past and present but also looking toward the future.

**THINGS**

The majority of late nineteenth- and early twentieth-century European and American collectors of Korean art had limited knowledge about Korea or its culture and had never visited the country. They usually had an interest in East Asian art in general, which included Korea to a lesser degree, and acquired works predominantly from Japanese dealers. Of all the Korean art forms, ceramics have received the greatest attention in the West and make up the bulk of most collections in European and American museums. The history of the Korean collection at The Met follows this trend.\(^8\)

Celadon, the predominant ceramic ware produced in the Goryeo dynasty, was highly sought-after by European and American collectors.\(^9\) Vacillating between green,
Fig. 9. View of the inaugural installation of the Arts of Korea Gallery, 1998
blue, and gray, the color of celadon is its defining feature, so much so that it is called *cheongja*, or green ware, in Korean. The English designation “celadon” is likely derived from the name of a character in a seventeenth-century French pastoral comedy who wore a green robe. Since the time of their production, these artworks have been coveted for their unique hue, surface decoration, and organic forms (figs. 10–12).

In response to changes in patronage and political and socioeconomic conditions during the transition to the Joseon dynasty (1392–1910), a new type of ceramic adapting the techniques of celadon organically emerged in the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries. Now referred to as buncheong, a term coined in the 1930s, these gray-hued ceramics have coarser bodies decorated with white slip and looser, more expressive motifs. Unlike celadon and porcelain, buncheong ware exhibits distinctive regional characteristics. Kilns in Gyeongsang Province produced buncheong with well-defined inlaid or stamped patterns (see fig. 2). Buncheong from Jeolla Province were generally decorated with freely executed incised or sgraffito designs. Iron-painted buncheong typically came from kilns in Chungcheong Province, though a rare example from a kiln in South Jeolla Province is now in The Met collection (fig. 13). The only two other known examples of intact bottles with this design of a flowering plant from that Jeolla kiln are in the collections of the Museum of Oriental Ceramics, Osaka, and the Leeum Museum of Art, Seoul. An increase in the popularity of porcelain, along with the destructive invasions of Joseon Korea by Momoyama Japan, in 1592 and 1598, led to the extinction of buncheong ware. When the ceramic industries were rebuilt in the seventeenth century, only porcelain was produced, and, until the twentieth century, buncheong all but disappeared from the Korean peninsula. Incidentally, a parallel history of buncheong took shape in Japan, initially through Joseon exports and then through the descendants of Korean ceramists who had been forcibly removed to Japan at the time of the invasions, and through Japanese potters who had learned the technique.

If green celadon is synonymous with the Goryeo dynasty, then white porcelain is the ceramic of the Joseon dynasty. Unlike that of buncheong, the production

![Fig. 10. Bowl with two boys and lotuses, Goryeo dynasty (918–1392), early 12th century. Stoneware with mold-pressed design under celadon glaze, Diam. 7¾ in. (19.7 cm). The Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York, Gift of Sadajiro Yamanaka, 1911 (11.8.6)](image)

![Fig. 11. Gourd-shaped ewer with waterfowl and reeds, Goryeo dynasty (918–1392), early 12th century. Stoneware with carved and incised design under celadon glaze, H. 10½ in. (26.7 cm). The Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York, Fletcher Fund, 1927 (27.119.2)](image)
Fig. 12. Vertical flute with chrysanthemums, cranes, and clouds, Goryeo dynasty (918–1392), early 13th century. Stoneware with inlaid design under celadon glaze, L. 14¼ in. (36.5 cm). The Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York, Purchase, Friends of Asian Art Gifts, 2008 (2008.71)
of porcelain, called *baekja* (white ware) in Korean, was centralized. In the 1460s, the royal court established and managed a group of kilns at Bunwon, and these were the official court kilns until their privatization in the 1880s. By the sixteenth century, porcelain had moved beyond the court and the elite, and white ware was being produced in regional kilns, consumed in greater numbers, and made in nearly every shape. Large bulbous vessels without any surface decoration, now known as moon jars, were popular in the eighteenth century (fig. 14). In the following century, top-heavy forms with high necks and round shoulders tapering to a narrow base were favored (fig. 15).

During Japan’s colonization of Korea (1910–45), blue-and-white Joseon porcelain was instrumental to the theories and development of Japanese *mingei* (folk, or craft) aesthetics (figs. 16, 17). The Japanese admiration for Joseon art was genuine, but it was often couched in terms of simplicity and primitivism, shaped by imperialism, and positioned to bolster colonialist efforts. Conversely, Koreans celebrated ceramics as exemplary cultural achievements to promulgate nationalist agendas, as they continue to do today.

Many twentieth-century Korean painters, such as Kim Whanki, admired and collected Joseon decorative arts. Kim was in particular an enthusiast of Joseon porcelains and made them a frequent subject in paintings, sketches, and magazine illustrations. His 1954 painting *Moon and Jar* could correctly but inadequately be described as a white asymmetrical porcelain jar on a tall, thin, salmon-colored pedestal against a backdrop of blue (fig. 18). Stylistically, the work demonstrates Kim’s keen sense of color, adroit brushwork, and use of segmentation and shapes—characteristics that he developed further in his later abstract works. Kim’s images are deceptively complex. While the jar and pedestal are immediately discernible, the multihued blue background does not seem representational. But from the title, we know to read the blue circle as the moon in a nighttime sky. By making the blue moon and the white jar nearly equal in diameter, Kim equates the two things. In fact, he is widely credited with giving the name “moon jar” to this
type of unadorned white round Joseon vessel, though the evidence for this is anecdotal. During the Joseon period, these vessels were utilitarian objects and referred to as daeho (literally, “big jar”). Placing such a jar on a pedestal changes it into an object worthy of appreciation and depiction. The jar is the subject of the painting, but it is not an auspicious symbol or visual pun, thus setting this work apart from earlier forms of Korean still life painting.4 Yet there is also a poignant nostalgia in this depiction of porcelain. Much of Kim’s collection was lost or destroyed during the Korean War (1950–53). Later, while in Paris (1956–59) and New York (1963–74), Kim found comfort and inspiration in Joseon objects, which he continued to collect.

Lee Seung-taek, like Kim Whanki, who was one of his teachers, invokes earlier art traditions in his work, but his engagement is less about memory or recuperation and more about, as he states, questioning “stereotypical notions of materials” and seeking to “transform the present into the past and the past into the present.”5 In Tied White Porcelain from 1979, the addition of a ceramic “rope” to a white jar transforms a familiar object into a mysterious one (fig. 19). The interior and exterior of a jar are often thought of as discrete spaces: the interior is a receptacle, unadorned and invisible, while the visible exterior is ideal for decoration. Lee breaks this convention by having the rope emerge from inside and fall over the lip onto the outside. He entices us to look inside to find its source. Moreover, the jar and its adornment do not follow the centuries-long conventions of porcelain. By the twentieth century, porcelain was revered both for its elegance and for embodying Confucian aesthetics of simplicity, austerity, and solemnity. The rope confounds this reading. It is more nonsensical than elegant. For Lee, that seems to be the point: an object does not need to make sense as an artwork, as a sculpture, or as an ornament.

In their postwar drive for reconstruction, the authoritarian Korean governments of the 1960s and 1970s placed a premium on value—functional or symbolic—and all concepts and materials were required to align with nationalist agendas. Lee subverts these criteria of value. On the one hand, he revives “traditional” objects that were becoming obsolete and devalued in an industrialized society. On the other hand, he challenges the efforts to use traditional objects to form a nationalist historical narrative that essentializes and reifies Korean art and culture.

Many other contemporary Korean artists have appropriated traditional decorative arts as a means through which to challenge norms and comment on the present moment. Through her 2000 series Cyborg, Lee Bul addresses patriarchal repression of women and highlights the ideals and fears associated with technology.
Fig. 18. Kim Whanki (김환기 金煥基, 1913–1974). *Moon and Jar* (달과 항아리), 1954. Oil on canvas, 63 3/8 × 38 3/16 in. (162.2 × 97 cm). Leeum Museum of Art, Seoul
Her human-size cyborgs are not “whole” but fractured, and their curvaceous shapes, long nails, and breast-like forms suggest a female gender. Like most of her work, Cyborg juxtaposes concepts that are often in tension—human and machine, paragon and monster, beautiful and grotesque, utopia and dystopia. In creating parts of a futuristic cyborg in porcelain, Lee connects the past and present, old and new technologies (figs. 20, 21). Scale is also of vital importance here, as these parts are similar in height to the aforementioned Joseon porcelain vessels (see figs. 14, 15, and 17). In this way, Lee illustrates that objectification, particularly of Asian women, goes beyond the pictorial and sculptural and extends to the ceramic vessels and decorative arts that have long fostered exoticism and fetishism via such Western decorative styles as Chinoiserie and Japonisme.

Goryeo celadon, especially in the West, is synonymous with exceptional Korean art, and its inconsistent, indescribable color—is it gray-green? green-blue? green-bluish-gray?—is its most alluring feature. Recognizing that it is a fool’s errand to think one description would suffice, the Korean American artist Byron Kim created Goryeo Green Glaze #1 and Goryeo Green Glaze #2, two paintings that are part of a larger series, to replicate and explore celadon’s most sublime and transcendent characteristic (figs. 22, 23). Through images that engage with the decorative motifs and glazes on the surface of clay bodies, Kim correlates a potter’s ornamentation and glazing process to that of a painter. As Kim explains, “The belief in the beauty of Koryŏ [sic] green glaze reminded me of the value placed on abstract painting in Western culture.”16 By focusing on color, Kim pushes against conventions of tradition and abstraction without completely abandoning taxonomic structures. Through seriality, he defies the reduction of objects and cultures to singular characteristics and contends with artistic hierarchies and sociocultural environments that inform value and appreciation.
Fig. 20. Lee Bul (이불, b. 1964). Cyborg Leg, 2000. Porcelain, 21 × 9 × 14 in. (53.3 × 22.9 × 35.6 cm). The Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York, Gift of Thaddaeus Ropac, Salzburg, 2023 (2023.285.1)

Fig. 21. Lee Bul (이불, b. 1964). Cyborg Pelvis, 2000. Porcelain, 14 × 12 × 14 in. (35.6 × 30.5 × 35.6 cm). The Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York, Gift of Thaddaeus Ropac, Salzburg, 2023 (2023.285.2)
Fig. 22. Byron Kim (b. 1961). Goryeo Green Glaze #1, 1995–96. Oil on linen, 84 × 60 in. (213.4 × 152.4 cm). Leeum Museum of Art, Seoul
Fig. 23. Byron Kim (b. 1961). Goryeo Green Glaze #2, 1996. Oil on linen, 84 × 60 in. (213.4 × 152.4 cm). Leeum Museum of Art, Seoul
Fig. 24. Unidentified artist. Gathering of Government Officials, Joseon dynasty (1392–1910), ca. 1551. Hanging scroll; ink and color on silk, 82½ x 36 in. (209.6 x 91.4 cm). The Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York, Purchase, Acquisitions Fund, and The Vincent Astor Foundation and Hahn Kwang Ho Gifts, 2008 (2008.55)

Fig. 25 (opposite). Ko Hui-dong (고희동 高羲東, 1886–1965). Autumn Landscape (추경산수), 1931. Ink and color on paper, 49¼ x 12 in. (126.5 x 30.5 cm). National Museum of Modern and Contemporary Art, Korea
PLACES

The formation of lineages and histories cannot be separated from place. From the Confucian emphasis on the importance of recognizing one’s position in a broader societal structure to the vast displacements that shaped the Korean diaspora in the modern period, place has long been deeply ingrained in Korean art, with ties to notions of belonging, homeland, and identity.

Notably, Korean landscape paintings often carry deeper meanings beyond an interest in nature. During the Joseon dynasty, landscape was one of the most revered subjects, and it provided opportunities to demonstrate skills in controlling ink and the calligraphic line. Known as the Three Perfections, calligraphy, painting, and poetry were considered the highest forms of art, and they are all found in gyeohoedo, a fifteenth- and sixteenth-century Korean landscape genre that records notable social gatherings, usually of men in government.

In the hanging scroll Gathering of Government Officials, from about 1551, the lyrical inscription at the top identifies the painted event as a reunion of sixty-year-old men who entered the civil service around the same time (fig. 24). Written by Jeong Sa-ryong (정사룡 鄭士龍, 1491–1570), an eminent poet, calligrapher, and civil official, the text offers a vivid description of the camaraderie among colleagues as they feast and recite poetry together. The gathering is rendered with an unusual amount of detail, showing that this is a well-planned event with cushions, books, and writing implements; plenty of food and drink; and ten attendants on hand to serve.

Nevertheless, it is the landscape that takes center stage in the scroll; the figures are small and situated on an outcrop in the lower right. The importance of nature is conveyed through the large rocky mountains that recede into the distance, the long winding stream, and the crashing waves carefully rendered with thin lines. Apart from the group, the landscape is devoid of human life. This image is as much about communing with nature as it is about social interactions. The seated figure holding his knees next to the table confirms this fact by looking into the distance. While recording an actual gathering, the painting is an idealized landscape with every element skillfully executed in an elegant style that fuses multiple pictorial traditions.

Over time, landscape became a means of displaying different painting techniques, including an engagement with Western art, which was known in Korea as early as the sixteenth century through Joseon Koreans’ direct encounter with Europeans in Qing China and Edo Japan and through the circulation of printed images. By the mid-nineteenth century, some Korean artists had begun to incorporate linear perspective and chiaroscuro into their work.
Ko Hui-dong is widely referred to as Korea’s first oil painter. He went to Japan in 1909. Although he enrolled in the Western painting department at the Tokyo School of Fine Arts, becoming its first Korean graduate, he eventually returned to ink painting in the 1920s. In works such as Autumn Landscape, from 1931, he integrated the techniques of seoyanghwa (Western-style painting) and dongyanghwa (Eastern-style painting) (fig. 25). In this long, thin hanging scroll, the natural elements have solidity—the trees grow out of a level portion of firm ground and the peach-colored mountain is a vertical mass that recedes back. With his familial connections, fluency in several languages, diverse training, and active participation in art societies and associations, Ko was very influential in Korea, and his style choices would be used to champion (then and now) first “modern” and
then “traditional” art. Hence, in Autumn Landscape, his election to paint what could be a Korean scene, real or imagined, in ink and color on paper can be easily linked to political issues related to ethnic consciousness, nationalism, and social hierarchy. Like so many artists active in the early twentieth century, Ko grappled with his identity as a Korean and an artist, questioning how and what it meant to make modern art.20

If Ko Hui-dong’s Autumn Landscape can be broadly described as an ink landscape with some Western painting techniques, then Paik Nam-soon’s Paradise, from 1936, is an oil painting that incorporates Korean painting techniques (fig. 26). Paik trained in oil painting at the Women’s School of Fine Arts in Tokyo and, in 1928, went to study in Paris, where she became interested in Fauvism. As colonial subjects, Koreans were allowed to travel abroad,
but they were denied the same status as their Japanese counterparts. This was particularly true for women. Nonetheless, Paik was the first professional Korean woman artist to exhibit internationally, participating in the Salon des Tuileries and Salon d’Automne in 1929.

In *Paradise*, Paik literally maps European representational techniques onto a Korean framework, combining Western media—oil on canvas—on a decidedly Korean painting format—an eight-panel folding screen. The shapes of the peaks, the waterfall that streams into a pool, the low bridges, and the unoccupied thatched pavilion are common to ink landscapes. Yet some of the architecture, the nude and partially clothed figures, the color palette, and the painting style all come from Western art. *Paradise* was a wedding gift for Paik’s friend. In the bucolic scene, men are working, and women seem more at their leisure. A male-female pair appears on the rightmost panel. Customarily, folding screens are read from right to left, so the couple is on the first panel. Their position on the threshold of this picturesque landscape likely echoes Paik’s auspicious wishes for her friend as she enters marital life.

Alongside utopian landscapes, there was a tradition of depicting actual locations in Korean art. After the destructive Japanese and Manchu invasions in the late sixteenth and early seventeenth centuries, respectively, there was a renewed awareness of Korea’s position within East Asia that spurred an interest in the peninsula’s natural topography and historic places. In the eighteenth century, painter Jeong Seon (정선, 1676–1759) frequently visited famed picturesque locations, which he sketched and painted on-site. These images, particularly those of Mount Geumgang, or the Diamond Mountains, ushered in a new genre of landscape painting. His legacy is evident in the work of Sin Hak-gwon, especially in Sin’s panoramic view of the interior section of Geumgang, where forty-six well-known sites are identified by name (fig. 27). Sin’s juxtaposition of the tree-covered hills in the foreground—delineated through washes and short strokes—and the jagged peaks in the background deliberately echoes the style of Jeong. The double outlines around the spindly peaks, however, which give a slightly blurry impression, are Sin’s trademark. In the inscription, the artist notes that he “copied” a work by Jeong whose condition was deteriorating. Unable to make the pilgrimage to Geumgang himself, Sin used Jeong’s compositions, as did Jeong’s contemporaries, as substitutes for travel that either fueled or satisfied a longing for the famed mountains.

*Spring Dawn at Mount Baegak* is a depiction of Gyeongbok Palace with its main gate, Gwanghwamun, in front and Mount Baegak (today referred to as Mount Bugak) prominent in the background (fig. 28). An Jung-sik, one of the last Joseon court painters, creates a sense of recession leading to the gate, behind which a compressed space contains the palace with dense trees and

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*Fig. 27. Sin Hak-gwon (신학권, 1785–1866). General View of Inner Geumgang, Joseon dynasty (1392–1910), mid-19th century. Six sheets of paper mounted as a single panel; ink and light color on paper, 18⅝ × 92⅓ in. (47.3 × 235 cm). The Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York, Purchase, Friends of Asian Art Gifts, Gift of Dr. Mortimer D. Sackler, Theresa Sackler and Family, and Brooke Russell Astor Bequest, 2017 (2017.185)*
the large mountain beyond. Built three years after the founding of the Joseon dynasty in 1392, Gyeongbok Palace was the symbolic seat of the Joseon kings. The title of this painting comes from the four-character inscription notably written in an archaic script often favored for titles. The adjacent, smaller inscription, written in a more standard script, provides the date, “summer 1915.” An made a second, very similar painting with the same title and year, but linked it to autumn in the inscription (fig. 29). Which begs the question, why do they share the title “spring dawn” when the inscriptions refer to summer and autumn, respectively? An rendered Gwanghwamun quite faithfully, but he does not portray Gyeongbok Palace and its environs as they looked in 1915—he has created romanticized representations of reality. After 1910, Gyeongbok Palace was no longer the seat of governance, and the colonial Japanese government systematically changed the palace architecture, destroying many buildings and replacing them with temporary exhibition halls. The road leading to Gwanghwamun was a busy thoroughfare, but An’s paintings are devoid of people and activity. In the summer version, the dense trees look like overgrowth, enveloping and overtaking the vacated palace, and the doors of Gwanghwamun are firmly shut—the palace and the sovereignty it represented are inaccessible. Yet the looming Mount Baegak exudes natural grandeur and solidity. Compared to the autumn version and contemporary photographs, the centrality of the mountain is An’s fabrication. Topographically, the autumn version is more accurate. Mount Baegak and Gwanghwamun do not align; the imposing peak is to the gate’s west. In repositioning the immovable mountain to the center in the summer version, An calls back to a tradition of imagined, poetic landscape painting in which a monumental central mountain would serve as a representation of strong governance and order. With the palace closed, Mount Baegak is not an emblem of governance but of the land itself. Sovereignty is lost, but the land is still strong and thriving, and in that An seems to find the hopefulness of a spring dawn.

Real and imagined landscapes, along with feelings of inaccessibility and nostalgia, took on a different form after the Korean War. The 1953 Korean Armistice Agreement brought about a cease-fire and the establishment of the demilitarized zone (DMZ) near the thirty-eighth parallel north. The aforementioned famed Mount Geumgang is situated north of the parallel, making it a faraway paradise and a symbol of loss for those living south of the DMZ.

Byeon Gwan-sik first learned painting from his maternal grandfather, the court painter Jo Seok-jin (조석진, 1853–1920), before studying in Tokyo in the 1920s. In the 1930s and 1940s, he traveled extensively, visiting Mount Geumgang many times. After the Korean War, Byeon created numerous images based on his vivid memories of the site. Bodeok Cave, from 1960, illustrates Byeon’s skill in using scale and perspective to
Fig. 28. An Jung-sik (안중식, 1861–1919). Spring Dawn at Mount Baegak (백악춘효), 1915. Hanging scroll; ink and color on silk, 77¼ × 25¾ in. (197.5 × 63.7 cm). National Museum of Korea, Seoul

Fig. 29. An Jung-sik (안중식, 1861–1919). Spring Dawn at Mount Baegak (백악춘효), 1915. Hanging scroll; ink and color on silk, 49¾ × 20¾ in. (125.9 × 51.5 cm). National Museum of Korea, Seoul
Fig. 30. Byeon Gwan-sik (변관식, 1899–1976). *Bodeok Cave* (보덕굴), 1960. Panel; light color on paper, 103⅔ × 47⅜ in. (264 × 120.5 cm). Leeum Museum of Art, Seoul
convey the mountain’s vastness and grandeur (fig. 30). He keeps to the tradition of placing diminutive figures within the landscape, but he enlivens them with expressive postures of active looking. The figures wear traditional dress, which suggests to us that this is a scene from the past, a memory. After becoming a South Korean citizen, Byeon could no longer be one of those figures enjoying Mount Geumgang—this landscape is a place that he could not visit again.

After decades of authoritarian rule, South Korea’s prodemocracy Minjung movement culminated in the 1980s with protests that were met with violent suppression. Nevertheless, this powerful movement led to constitutional changes and South Korea’s first democratic elections, in 1987. Like the political milieu, artists were divided into factions, with certain styles associated with the opposing political ideologies. Realism became the banner technique of the Minjung movement, while abstraction was often seen as conservative.26

One of the few artists who refused to be categorized is Kim Hong Joo, whose work captures the uncertainty in post-Minjung South Korea. Kim’s untitled painting from 1993 is as much about the profound societal disruption effected by rapid modernization as it is about place (fig. 31). In this split composition, the lower half is a meticulously painted soft grassland surrounding a reservoir. At the dividing horizon line—an allusion to the partition at the DMZ—the border of the pasture appears as artificial as the blades of grass look real. In the upper half, silk-screened photographs of new and old buildings float alongside painted rootless trees and planted fields within a flat, unpainted vertical plane. Looking again, we
can see that the shape of the reservoir is strangely reminiscent of the Korean peninsula while also containing an anamorphic portrait of the artist, a conceit that adds a human presence to a landscape and refers to Western painting traditions. Through every aspect of this painting, from the silk-screened photographs and precisely painted grass to the distorted imagery and conceptualization of space, Kim questions and challenges the forms and languages of representation.

In *My/Our Country*, from 2014, Do Ho Suh creates the Korean peninsula out of a mass of small bronze figurines, each a little over a half inch high (fig. 32). This inextricable link between place and people, found above in Kim Hong Joo’s anamorphic face, is also present in *People*, a work by Do Ho Suh’s father, Suh Se Ok. This is not to assert that *My/Our Country* correlates to *People* because of the artists’ father-son relationship; nevertheless, the two works resonate in their repetitive use of a person, be it a figurine or an ideograph, to transform an image of a place or landscape. In Suh Se Ok’s painting, the people and place are intentionally unidentifiable. His focus was on material, medium, and the legacy of ink painting in Korean art. Conversely, through form and title, Do Ho Suh specifies the place in his image as the country of Korea and the people as Korean citizens. The frequent conflation of the individual and the collective is seen in the title: 우리 나라 (*Uri Nara*). *Uri* directly translates to “our/we,” and *nara* to “country.” But Suh rightly translates *uri* to “my/our,” because when speaking in Korean about one’s country, family, school, employer, etc., one says “our” and “we,” though implying “my” and “I.” By using *uri* and the linguistic ambiguity of “my/our” in his title, Suh incorporates and places the individual into a larger collective unit. In *My/Our Country*, the uniform height and density of the figurines create a geographical mass without topographical qualities. Although the peninsula is known for its hilly terrain, here it is nearly flat, recalling the way terms like *uri*, “nation,” and “culture” represent collectives, erasing and flattening an individual to a word or concept. Yet, notably, these figurines are not impersonal iterations. Do Ho Suh counters the flattening by giving the figurines faces, different postures, and distinctive clothing. There are old and young people, men and women. Some even interact with adjacent figurines. Prescient of a future when one can zoom in and out of images with ease, Do Ho Suh not only challenges us to consider questions of collective identity and individualism but also reminds us that macro and micro perspectives will provide different yet limited information and that we should be looking at both the parts and the whole.
The different ways in which Byeon, Kim, and Suh incorporate people in their works demonstrate a significant change in art production. Prior to the twentieth century, calligraphy and landscape were the revered modes of painting, and figural representation was predominantly relegated to portraiture. The overall increase in figural representation across various genres, along with an expansion in the types of and the manner in which people are depicted, reflects comprehensive societal change and reconfiguration of the class system.

During the Joseon dynasty, ancestor portraits were important in neo-Confucian society. These commemorative objects would have been placed in a family shrine dedicated to honoring the family’s male lineage, in accordance with neo-Confucian philosophy. Dressed in formal attire, seated in three-quarter view on a high-backed chair atop a woven mat, and set against a blank background, the subject in the Portrait of Yun Dong-seom, from about 1790–1805, reflects all the formal conventions of ancestral portraiture (fig. 33). With the exception of his face and the tips of his shoes, Yun’s body...
is concealed by the voluminous, patterned robe. The folds of the billowing sleeves and the white underrobe suggest that Yun’s hidden hands are placed on his thighs. Along with the opulent robe, there are other markers of high status: the leopard skin draped on the chair, the colorful hyungbae (rank badge) of double cranes with a bullocho (elixir plant), the decorative belt, and the footrest. The subtle shading to articulate his facial features and the robe’s volume is evidence of the greater circulation and influence of European images, painting techniques, and materials in Korea during the eighteenth century.

The growth of photography in early twentieth-century Korea brought about an increase in the use of illusionistic techniques in painting. In Portrait of a Scholar, dated to 1924, the selective shading and crisp lines seen in the depiction of Yun Dong-seom’s face give way to expert modeling and naturalistic wrinkles (fig. 34). One can sense the sitter’s corporeality. Nevertheless, his attire is not handled in the same manner as his face and hands. Even with the addition of white highlights, a technique borrowed from Western painting, his robes are not meant to be photorealistic, suggesting the ways in which the artist skillfully selected different techniques to create a distinctive style that was both old and new. The inclusion of folding screens in portraits like this one may have its origin in photography, since they were commonly used as backdrops in photography studios. Although unidentified, the sitter, with his black-trimmed white robe and double-tiered hat with three peaks, is clearly a scholar in informal garb. This portrait, like the one of Yun, would have been used in rituals remembering the ancestors. It is noteworthy that the scroll’s red cord with tassels, a display convention of ancestral portraiture, has survived, as most are lost.

Due to its expert rendering and stylistic similarities to other signed portraits, this image has been attributed to Chae Yong-sin. Chae passed the military service examination in 1887, but he became renowned for his ability to retain earlier portraiture conventions while adding photographic qualities and was appointed royal portraitist in 1901. After Korea lost diplomatic sovereignty in 1905, he retired from his post. He was known to paint from photographs, especially as age limited his mobility; this portrait may very well have had a photographic, rather than live, model.

With the androcentrism of neo-Confucianism, there is a dearth of female ancestral portraits. As pungsokhwa (genre paintings of everyday life) became more widespread starting in the late seventeenth century, images of women—predominantly gisaeng (female entertainers), commoners, and shamans—became more prevalent. While the importance and virtues of women as matriarchs, wives, and daughters were extolled in literature, such figures only began to be depicted in artworks in the late nineteenth century, often as double portraits with their husbands.

Portrait of a Woman, from about 1920–40, depicts an interior environment similar to those found in images from early twentieth-century photography studios, complete with a folding screen, tables, potted flowers, a vase, and a patterned mat (fig. 35). Flower motifs surround the sitter, from the plants on the table to the vase covered in multicolored blooms and the folding screen.
decorated with a bird-and-flower composition in faint ink. In her lap, she holds a spray of peonies. Even the blue tablecloth is dotted with small flowers.

In contrast to the many details surrounding the sitter—the green cushion with dense tassels, her long braid intertwined with a red textile, the gold-painted planter with floral motifs, and the lush leaves of the peonies—her face stands out as one of the palest portions of the paintings. Due to her white complexion, closer inspection is needed to see the carefully rendered features. Her nose and ears are articulated through thin lines, her small full mouth is light pink, and her piercing eyes are depicted with dark gray irises, black pupils, and defined upper lids. Echoing the curve of the eyes, her eyebrows are a faint gray. The rest of her face is unmottled, as if the painter did not want to disturb her pale skin with her features. This unshaded, porcelaneous face conveys female beauty standards of the time and mirrors the trend in contemporary East Asian portrait photography in which studio lighting was arranged to diminish shadows on the face. While every wrinkle on the aforementioned scholar was a testament to his
elderly and thus venerable status, the smooth white skin of the woman was a testament to her beauty and youthfulness. The treatment of her face, along with her long braid indicating her unmarried status, links this painting to the earlier Joseon genre of *miindo* (painting of a beauty), contemporary depictions of women in colonial Korea, and images of women in the Japanese genre of *nihonga* (literally, “Japanese painting”), which emerged in the late 1870s and early 1880s and was characterized by soft lines and pastel colors.

The sitter and her surroundings become the means of negotiating a complex web of old and new art forms within a changing and charged sociopolitical environment in *A Pair of Figures—Inquiry*, a painting by Lee Yootae (fig. 36). While there is similarly minimal articulation of features, the female’s face is not awash in white, as in the previous portrait. She has flesh-toned skin and a bit of rouge on her cheeks. Created in 1944, this image of a researcher seated in her laboratory is evidence of the changing status of women. The emergence of the “modern girl” or “new woman” (*sin yeoseong*) in Korea was part of a global phenomenon of expanding spheres of opportunity for women. The well-equipped laboratory, with its glass flasks, batteries, microscopes, and other instruments, shows Korea involved in scientific progress. While Lee is depicting recent social changes, he has not completely abandoned the past. Under the white coat, the researcher wears a hanbok (Korean dress). Between the white lapels, a one-bow tie and overlapping collar with white trim are just visible.

Signalizing the ambiguous response to modernization and female emancipation in colonial Korea, Lee exhibited *A Pair of Figures—Inquiry* as a diptych, pairing it with *A Pair of Figures—Composing a Verse in Response* (fig. 37), a work made the same year, in the last edition of the Joseon Fine Art Exhibition (Joseon misul jeollamhoe).
Commonly referred to as Seonjeon, this annual national salon was the most important art show in Korea at the time. *A Pair of Figures—Composing a Verse in Response* seems to be the antithesis of *A Pair of Figures—Inquiry*. A woman in a hanbok is seated in a stately interior with Asian- and Western-inspired furniture, a grand piano, and lush peonies. Her hair is parted at the side and neatly swept behind her ears. She rests her chin on the back of intertwined hands and appears lost in thought. From the title, she is likely thinking about her hwaun, a verse composed in response to a poem. On the surface, this seems to be a painting of a “traditional” woman. Yet as in *A Pair of Figures—Inquiry*, there are subtle nods to the present moment of change. The eclectic assortment of furniture is a coexistence of old and new. The piano, undoubtedly an emblem of wealth, is a Western instrument that signals new forms of learning and even Christianity, since many churches had pianos.

These two paintings complicate the categories in which women and art were placed. As art historian Joan Kee aptly states, “the deliberate presentation of the works as a diptych made palpable what the poet and essayist Mo Yun-suk described as the price of being a ‘modern woman’: ‘we have to carry out the duties of the housewife as well as work as professionals in the public realm.’” Is this the beginning of the superwoman type, when multiple roles are a requirement and the performance of those roles determines a woman’s legitimacy and worth?

The colonization of Korea by Japan had an indelible impact on art, not only on production but also on the manner in which it was viewed, interpreted, and categorized. After liberation in 1945, the Korean peninsula became a site of Cold War geopolitics, and the subsequent Korean War caused destruction to a degree that had never before been experienced.
Artists Kim Whanki and Chang Uc-chin explore these changes in two paintings produced in 1951. In Kim’s *Refugee Train*, against a deep blue sky, a row of train cars travels on tracks running along a burnished red ground (fig. 38). The cars are full, overflowing with rectangular forms topped with red and peach dots. Due to the abbreviated style, the cargo is not immediately identifiable as people, though this fact is confirmed by the title. The Korean War brought about an unprecedented level of movement. Masses fled on foot and via crammed trains and boats. After the formation of the DMZ, the peninsula was a divided entity for the first time since the seventh century. Partition with an impermeable border was an inconceivable outcome. The numerous refugee settlements that sprang up were thought to be temporary; those who had come south would return home after the turmoil. But with the DMZ, movement became displacement, escape became migration, and momentary separation became permanent rupture. Small as it is, Kim’s painting suggests the ways in which the war placed pressure upon the language of formal abstraction. Breaking from representation, abstraction was heralded as a language of artistic freedom. But as a Euro-American art movement, abstraction in the Korean context was seemingly entwined with Cold War politics and the horrific realities of war.

In Chang Uc-chin’s deceptively simple-looking *Ferry Boat*, the five faceless figures can be identified as a ferryman, a boy with a bicycle, a woman carrying a heavy bundle atop her head, a woman clutching a parcel in her arms, and a young man with a backpack, who may be the owner of the cow next to him (fig. 39). The subjects are in passage, despite the relatively static quality of the composition. Read within the context of the refugee crisis during the Korean War and considered alongside Kim Whanki’s painting, this image seems to show how Chang too grappled with the tide of people fleeing war in search of shelter, carrying their lives on their heads and backs. Chang’s straightforward painting style echoes his proclamation of being a simple man, but it does not limit his expressiveness. Through his use of simple forms, Chang is also able to convey loss, isolation, and bereavement without formally depicting trauma.

Fig. 38. Kim Whanki (김환기 1913–1974). *Refugee Train* (피난열차), 1951. Oil on canvas, 14 1/2 x 20 1/2 in. (37 x 52 cm). Private collection

Fig. 39. Chang Uc-chin (장욱진 1917–1990). *Ferry Boat* (나룻배), 1951. Oil on panel, 5 1/4 x 11 1/2 in. (13.7 x 29 cm). National Museum of Modern and Contemporary Art, Korea, Lee Kun-Hee Collection
The muted colors and heavily textured surface of the 1965 painting *Tree and Two Women* by Park Soo-keun are in stark contrast to those in *Ferry Boat*, and yet both images are infused with sentiment conveyed through elemental forms (fig. 40). Park came from a humble background and vowed to become an artist after seeing a work by the self-taught French painter Jean-François Millet (1814–1875). In the 1940s, while he was in Pyeongyang, Park developed his signature style, which is often described as stonelike because of its gray and brown palette and mottled surface, inspired by granite Buddhist sculptures and pagodas, and by wall paintings in the recently excavated Goguryeo tombs (37 BCE–668 CE). Early on in his career, Park made a living drawing portraits of American soldiers stationed in Seoul. In his own work, he portrayed everyday people, primarily women and children, reflecting the indelible impact of Millet. Though postwar Korea was firmly a Confucian society, the deaths of so many, especially men, meant widows and daughters shouldered the weight of recovery and reconstruction. In depicting women, often caring for children or at work, Park recognizes their indispensability and seemingly empathizes with their burdens of survival. Painted in his rough style, the women take on a monumental permanence inspired by Buddhist monuments, a connection that may also be an artistic response to the swift changes overtaking postwar Korea.

The 1970s and 1980s in South Korea saw rapid industrialization and urbanization concomitant with increasing authoritarianism, which gave rise to a grassroots democratization movement known as Minjung, discussed earlier. Artists like Lee Jong-gu, who were a part of the Minjung art movement, adopted realism as a deliberately politicized aesthetic language that challenged the quiet abstraction of earlier artists, such as Kim Whanki and Lee Ufan (discussed later). Lee Jong-gu highlighted the harsh realities faced by Korean farmers and laborers in his hyperrealistic paintings. His attention to detail is evident in the weathered, tanned faces and rough, veiny hands of the men in *Earth-at-Oziri (Oziri People)* (fig. 41). Squatting and gazing directly at us, the men are not briefly resting but anticipating defiance. What they are waiting for is hard to determine. If the wall of campaign posters and newspapers is an indicator, perhaps they are waiting for substantial, and real, socio-political change. The collage of pasted papers in the background creates a sense of trompe l’oeil, making it difficult to discern the multiple levels of reality in the composition. Which is more real: the posters promising change or the men awaiting a different kind of reality?

Upon closer inspection, it is apparent that the men are situated in a bizarre setting. Their brown shadows morph into a receding tract of farmland with a red-roofed house set against hills and a light blue sky. The sky blends into the blue of the Roh Tae-woo presidential-campaign poster, and the hills are met with torn edges of newspaper spreads. The posters and newspapers look to be on a wall. What is this backdrop? Is it a wall that had a painting of a field that was then pasted over with posters? Are the men in front of this wall? Where does the ground meet the wall? Lee makes the image more surreal with the cutouts of floating cabbages and a pack of Camel cigarettes. He cheekily uses a Marlboro cigarette carton to stand in for a house.

Questioning reality was central to the practice of hyperrealistic painting, which in Korea became tethered to social critique and was less associated with commercialism in contrast to the practice in America. Through his painting style, juxtaposition of incongruous elements, and choice and use of materials, Lee reveals the banality of “seeing is believing.” *Earth-at-Oziri (Oziri People)* is infused with skepticism, evident in the torn posters of left- and right-wing politicians with their campaign promises. He extends the skepticism to global politics,
Fig. 41. Lee Jong-gu (이종구, b. 1954). Earth-at-Oziri (Oziri People) (국토 - 오지리에서 [오지리사람들]), 1988. Acrylic and collage on grain bag, 78 ¾ × 67 in. (200 × 170 cm). National Museum of Modern and Contemporary Art, Korea
especially to America and the West, with the photographs of famine-stricken children and the English-language newspaper headlines reading “Reagan’s Code of Honor” and “A Rift in the Communist Party.” He even forces us to question the norms of art production by reusing bags that held grain as his substrate. The foreground is left unpainted, and the printing on the bags is clearly legible, calling attention to the fact that this work is not on the usual canvas, paper, silk, or wood. Just as anyone and everyone can be the subject of a work, anything can be used to make art.

As Lee demonstrates, Korean art defies straightforward categorization. Like Suh Se Ok’s People, Lee’s Earth-at-Oziri (Oziri People) seeks to challenge the traditional painterly languages of the past. Though the artistic outcomes are not always known, such art demands that we pay attention to the details and adopt gazes that are as dubious as those of the men in the painting, in search of future horizons.

LINES
Returning to Suh Se Ok’s People leads us to the final theme—lines—which reconsiders calligraphy and ink painting, two techniques synonymous with Korean art. On another level, lines suggest lineages and legacies, invisible connections across time.

Bamboo in the Wind (fig. 42), from the early seventeenth century, is a rare extant example of bamboo painting by Yi Jeong, a premier literati artist and great-great-grandson of King Sejong (세종대왕 世宗大王, r. 1418–50). Yi’s confidence and expertise are on display throughout the composition, from the lifting of the brush to form the leaves’ tapering ends and the precise changes in direction to create the tips bent by the wind to the faint gray depiction of bamboo in the background.

A favored subject for East Asian scholar-painters for over a millennium, bamboo is imbued with both Confucian and Daoist meanings; hence, it is as much a symbol as it is an object. As rendered in this painting, bamboo is admired for its ability to bend in the wind without breaking. It is a symbol of resilience and flexibility, of adapting but not succumbing to the harsh elements—all character traits of a virtuous person. These traits are referenced in the colophon describing the painting:

Aged bamboo has grown unevenly,
Branches lift together in the breeze,
Desolate and sparse, seeking to stir people,
Lingering resonance found nowhere else.37

The values of “seeking to stir people” and “lingering resonance” take on added meaning in the 1906 work Blood Bamboo, attributed to Yang Gi-hun (fig. 43). At first glance, the thin, jointed stalks and small and large leaves point to a continuation of the literati lineage found in the earlier Joseon bamboo painting by Yi Jeong. Yang trained as a court painter in the Joseon-dynasty Dohwaseo (Bureau of Painting), and he was particularly known for his plum blossom and goose paintings.38

Yet Yang painted Blood Bamboo in 1906, during a tumultuous time for the Korean peninsula. At the turn of the century, Korea had to contend with the increasing encroachment of Western countries and Meiji Japan. In response to rapidly changing global politics, King Gojong, who ascended to the throne in 1864, declared Joseon an empire in 1897, thus becoming the last Joseon king and the first emperor (r. 1897–1907) of the Korean Empire (Daehan Jeguk, 1897–1910). Japan’s victory in the Russo-Japanese War (1904–5) and the 1905 Taft-Katsura Memorandum, in which the United States agreed to reduce its involvement in Asia and allow Japan to take control of Korea, paved the way for Japan’s increasing imperial ambitions.39 Consequently, the Korean Empire was forced to sign the Eulsa Treaty (Japan–Korea Treaty of 1905), making Korea a protectorate of Japan and depriving the country of its diplomatic sovereignty.

Yang was asked to paint Blood Bamboo for the Korean Daily News (Daehan maeil sinbo) after the politician, diplomat, and general Min Young-hwan (민영환, 1861–1905) died by suicide in symbolic opposition to the Eulsa Treaty.40 When the room in which he had died was opened a year later, it was reported that bamboo stalks had grown through the floorboards where his bloody clothes had lain. The bamboo was said to have forty-five leaves, matching Min’s age at the time of his death, and to have been nurtured by Min’s blood, leading to its being called hyeoljuk, or “blood bamboo.” While Yang would create a few versions of Blood Bamboo, the original painting was first published on July 17, 1906, and subsequent versions were printed in other newspapers and circulated as woodblock prints.41

In the version reproduced here, the bamboo is situated against an unpainted backdrop growing from the land, not sprouting from the floorboards within an interior, as described in the colophon; this decision gives the subject a timeless quality. Painted in green, the bamboo is alive and connected to the land. Because of these choices, Blood Bamboo is more than a literati or calligraphic symbol and more than a continuation of a painting style.

Calligraphy has long been thought to reflect the writer’s moral character. The brush is an extension of the hand on an arm that is connected to the heart; thus, the style and ability of a calligrapher are said to mirror their heart and mind.42 Ahn Junggeun stands within a legacy of calligraphers who use an expressive brush to
Fig. 42. Yi Jeong (이정, 1541–1626). Bamboo in the Wind, Joseon dynasty (1392–1910), early 17th century. Hanging scroll; ink on silk with gold on colophon, 871/16 x 283/4 in. (223 x 73 cm). The Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York, Mary Griggs Burke Collection, Gift of the Mary and Jackson Burke Foundation, 2015 (2015.300.299)

Fig. 43. Attributed to Yang Gi-hun (양기훈, 1843–?). Blood Bamboo (혈죽도), 1906. Ink and color on silk, 491/2 x 211/4 in. (126 x 54 cm). Korea University Museum, Seoul
impart mantras, lament injustice, and inspire action. Ahn received a classical education, and as a young man witnessing the whittling away of Korea’s sovereignty, he devoted himself to studying geopolitics and history and sought to educate others by establishing schools. In 1907 he moved to the Vladivostok region (then Manchuria) to join fellow Korean independence activists. After hearing that Itō Hirobumi (伊藤 博文, 1841–1909), a Japanese politician who served as the first resident-general of Korea, would be passing through Manchuria, Ahn and others devised a plan to assassinate Itō; as a pledge to the plan, the activists each cut off the last joint of their ring finger. Ahn intercepted and fatally shot Itō at the Harbin Railway Station before being caught by the authorities. During his nearly six-month imprisonment before execution, Ahn wrote his autobiography and made calligraphic works that were much admired (fig. 44). On these works, he imprinted his self-mutilated left hand, a visual mark of his pledge and a poignant nod to the connection of a calligrapher’s hand, heart, and mind.

Lee Ufan channels the energetic precision of calligraphic strokes in his abstract paintings. The act of using a brush until the pigment it holds diminishes gradually to barely leave a mark is a calligraphic convention that Lee deliberately evokes in the 1979 painting From Line (fig. 45). Here, the closely spaced linear rows that start at the top edge and fill the entire length of the canvas make the viewer aware of the large dimensions of the work. The lack of a border creates a sense of fullness, even though each line fades and dissolves. Before moving to Japan in 1956, Lee studied ink painting with Suh Se Ok. Lee’s ability to produce a series of straight lines of equal width demonstrates his rigorous calligraphic discipline. Against the lineages of black calligraphy and ink painting, Lee chose to employ a blue pigment, derived from cobalt and cadmium.

Individuals like Lee recognized the numerous oppositional categories by which pre- and postwar artists and their works were being defined, such as traditional versus modern, ink versus oil, and representation versus abstraction. Lee grapples with these binaries by bringing together unlikely combinations of materials, objects, and concepts. From Line is evidence of this practice, as the painted line is both solid and porous and the visual field is full and empty. Lee’s embrace of the both-and paradigm is also present in the work’s title—“from” is as important as “line,” since it indicates a start, a process, and signals open-endedness and is not a definitive statement.

Like Lee Ufan, Yun Hyong-keun steered away from black in his paintings, because he understood that it had become a signifier of ink. He employed burnt umber and ultramarine, which are foregrounded in the titles of his works. Though it does not appear blue, Umber Blue, from
Fig. 45. Lee Ufan (이우환 李禹煥, b. 1936). *From Line (선에서)*, 1979. Oil on canvas, 76⅝ × 102½ in. (194 × 260 cm).
Leeum Museum of Art, Seoul
1975, is composed of obfuscated layers of pigment that create varying degrees of darkness (fig. 46). When looking at the thinned and layered paint, the visible brushstrokes, the blurred lines, and the weave of the linen in the unpainted areas, it is as if one has zoomed in very close to a section of an ink painting to examine the interactions between the paint and its substrate. But Yun was not attempting to mimic ink painting with oil and linen; rather, he was fascinated by the intimate interplay of materials. Yun visualizes time and accident in *Umber Blue* by harnessing the differences in solubility and viscosity of paint and turpentine as well as the variability of spreading and absorption. While he can determine where and when to layer the paint, the resultant hues and permutations are dependent on the concentration of the paint mixture and the degree of wetness of previous layers. By allowing absorption to play a role equal to application, Yun challenges the primacy of mark making that is intrinsically linked to ink painting. In painting the edges and placing the unmarked area in the center, he draws the eye to the texture of the linen support and to the areas where the paint and linen meet. The thin strips of paint at the top and bottom give the unpainted center a discrete shape even while the painted areas conform to the structure of the support and look as if they could extend beyond it. In this way, Yun counters ideas about emptiness or the void, concepts that often conjure up a notion of “Asian” spirituality or philosophy for non-Asian audiences.

Though an interest in the formal qualities of line appears to be central to the work of Kwon Young-woo, the artist complicates the standards and conceptions of mark making and gestural abstraction by interrogating the methods of ink painting. In postwar Korea, the choice of medium carried with it an existential weight, bound up in larger issues of identity and nationalism. Selecting ink painting versus oil painting signaled a different cultural path linked to broader issues of “Oriental” versus “Western,” which had other pejorative implications, including underdeveloped versus progressive and insular versus cosmopolitan. Trained as an ink painter, Kwon radically engaged with paper in the 1960s, directing his attention to *hanji* (literally, “Korean paper”) and exploring its potential for three-dimensional transformation as a way to refute the privileged status of painting over all other forms of art and its strict distinction from sculpture. Paper, as one of the Three Friends of the Scholar, is revered as an indispensable component of ink painting and calligraphy but usually as a support for ink and brush. By tearing, pasting, and molding, Kwon extricated paper from its substrate role and brought it to the forefront.

During the 1980s, while living in Paris, Kwon reengaged with ink and color while still drawing attention to
tion of ink painters called Munghimhoe (묵림회, Ink Forest Group). Wrestling with the same issues about style and materiality in relation to modernism and cultural identity, Kwon and Suh responded quite differently.

Similarly, all the artists discussed here have contended with domestic and global artistic conventions and lineages. Their works reveal the various methods and coexisting practices with which they responded. Many knew each other and debated about individual and national identity, politics, and art. Many became professors at the leading art schools and inspired future generations, creating legacies of their own. They are parts of a vast whole that makes up Korean art. Echoing the artists’ efforts against strict categorizations and foregrounding the importance of retaining plurality, the use of “s” in the exhibition title, as well as the plural form of each of the four themes, is as deliberate as the selection of objects and their groupings into loose constellations.

the paper substrate itself. *Untitled*, from 1984, is composed of long vertical cuts made at regular intervals and an undulating horizontal tear (fig. 47). A gray-blue color, a mix of ink and gouache, radiates outward from the center; it looks as if by capillary action to be bleeding from the vertical slashes. The color darkens the cuts, making them more visible—indeed, the darkest and thickest “line” is the horizontal space formed by tearing. This gap compels us to take a closer look to see if there is anything behind it. Kwon submitted to the paper by choosing to apply the color on the reverse and letting it seep through to the front. Thus, in returning to ink, Kwon challenged its supremacy and the often-glamorized act of laying ink on paper.

Kwon is a fitting close to this essay, since it began with Suh Se Ok. From the formal differences in their works, it may come as a surprise that the two were contemporaries and part of an influential artist association of ink painters called Munghimhoe (묵림회, Ink Forest Group). Wrestling with the same issues about style and materiality in relation to modernism and cultural identity, Kwon and Suh responded quite differently. Similarly, all the artists discussed here have contended with domestic and global artistic conventions and lineages. Their works reveal the various methods and coexisting practices with which they responded. Many knew each other and debated about individual and national identity, politics, and art. Many became professors at the leading art schools and inspired future generations, creating legacies of their own. They are parts of a vast whole that makes up Korean art. Echoing the artists’ efforts against strict categorizations and foregrounding the importance of retaining plurality, the use of “s” in the exhibition title, as well as the plural form of each of the four themes, is as deliberate as the selection of objects and their groupings into loose constellations.

Fig. 46. Yun Hyong-keun (윤형근, 1928–2007). *Umber Blue* (청다), 1975. Oil on linen, 51 1/2 x 38 1/2 in. (130 x 97 cm). National Museum of Modern and Contemporary Art, Korea
Fig. 47. Kwon Young-woo (권영우, 1926–2013). *Untitled*, 1984. Ink and gouache on *hanji* paper, 88 3/16 × 67 in. (224 x 170 cm). Leeum Museum of Art, Seoul
NOTES


2. In this essay and the related exhibition, the terms “Korea” and “Korean” refer to the entire peninsula for the period until the 1953 armistice, whereas for the subsequent period they refer solely to the Republic of Korea, known as South Korea, and its connections to American and Western European art movements and politics. Unfortunately, a proper examination of post-1953 art and culture of the Democratic People’s Republic of Korea, or North Korea, is beyond the scope of this project. Note also that some of the artworks discussed in this essay are not included in the exhibition at The Met.


6. Prior to the opening of the Arts of Korea Gallery, two exhibitions surveying Korean art traveled to several institutions across the United States and Europe, including The Met—one in 1957 and the other from 1979 to 1981. For more information, see Nancy Lin, “5000 Years of Korean Art: Exhibitions Abroad as Cultural Diplomacy,” in “Ideas of Asia in the Museum,” ed. Sonya S. Lee, special issue, Journal of the History of Collections 28, no. 3 (November 2016): pp. 383–400. The Korea Foundation and the Kun-Hee Lee Fund for Korean Art made possible the establishment of the gallery, along with its roster of exhibitions and public programs. The project was supervised by Judith G. Smith, then special assistant to the consultative chairman, and Hongkyung Anna Suh, curatorial assistant. A grant from the Republic of Korea’s Ministry of Culture, Sports and Tourism enabled a refurbishment in 2017.

7. There have been five special exhibitions in the Arts of Korea Gallery: the inaugural show, Arts of Korea (1998); Korean Ceramics from the Museum of Oriental Ceramics, Osaka (2000); Art of the Korean Renaissance, 1400–1600 (2009); Poetry in Clay: Korean Buncheong Ceramics from Leeum, Samsung Museum of Art (2011); and Diamond Mountains: Travel and Nostalgia in Korean Art (2018). Silla: Korea’s Golden Kingdom (2013–14) was held in a special exhibition space at The Met.


12. For example, the status of the moon jar as a national symbol was solidified when it became the model for the Olympic torch at the 2018 Winter Olympics in Pyeongchang.

13. After Kim Whanki’s death, items from his collection were exhibited at the National Museum of Korea, Seoul.


21. For more on Paik Nam-soon, see Horyuck, Korean Art, pp. 47–49.


25. See Lee et al., Diamond Mountains, pp. 81–82.


27. See n. 19 above.

28. I am grateful to Haely Chang for her insights about Chae Yong-sin and this painting. As of this writing, Haely is a Jane and Morgan Whitney Fellow at The Met and a PhD candidate in History of Art at the University of Michigan, Ann Arbor. She is completing a dissertation titled “Painting a Different Picture.”


35. Chang Uc-chin painted Ferry Boot on the back of his 1939 work A Girl. During and after the Korean War, many artists facing economic hardship reused what they had on hand or turned to unconventional materials.

36. See n. 26 above.

37. Translation by Tim Zhang.

38. For Joseon court painters and paintings, see The Court Painters of the Joseon Dynasty (in Korean), exh. cat. (Seoul: Leeum Museum of Art, 2011).


43. For more on Lee Ufan, see Alexandra Munroe et al., Lee Ufan: Marking Infinity, exh. cat. (New York: Guggenheim Museum, 2011); Joan Kee, Contemporary Korean Art: Tansaekhwa and the Urgency of Method (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2013), pp. 147–89.


47. For more on Kwon Young-woo, see Kee, Contemporary Korean Art, pp. 35–74.

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